

India-Africa Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: A Rising Partnership

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Abstract--The Indo-Pacific has emerged as a core arena of global geopolitics and geoconomics, shaped by dense maritime connectivity, critical sea lines of communication, and competition over resources. Encompassing much of the world's population, trade, and economic output, regional stability is closely linked to maritime security, freedom of navigation, and effective maritime governance. Within this context, the Indian Ocean Region holds particular importance for India and African coastal states, whose economic growth and security depend on secure sea lanes and sustainable marine resources. This study examines the evolving contours of India-Africa maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. It analyses India's strategic approach through initiatives such as SAGAR and Neighbourhood First, and its role in institutions like IORA and IONS, alongside Africa's growing focus on the maritime domain. The paper highlights cooperation in anti-piracy, capacity building, hydrography, joint exercises, and humanitarian assistance, while identifying challenges including limited capacity, governance gaps, resource constraints, and growing competition from extra-regional powers, particularly China.

Keywords-- Maritime, Cooperation, Indo-Pacific, Partnership, Security

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific region, linking the Indian and Pacific Oceans, constitutes a geographically unified and interconnected domain [1]. Spanning from Africa's eastern shores to the Western Pacific and the western coast of the United States, it encompasses diverse marine environments and coastal societies with varied cultural, economic, and political landscapes, bound together by maritime connectivity [2]. The surge in trade and economic interactions across these oceans has reinforced the Indo-Pacific's role as a cohesive geopolitical and geoeconomic entity [3][4]. Housing 64% of the world's population, including three of the top ten global economies- China, Japan, and India region generates 62% of global GDP [5].

The economic prominence of the Indo-Pacific is unmatched, with its sea lanes carrying 48% of global trade. It is home to 65% of the global population, contributes 62% to global GDP, and covers 44% of the Earth's surface[6].

The Middle East's 50% share of global crude oil reserves highlights the strategic importance of these oceans' maritime routes for energy security, particularly for nations like China, Japan, India, and the United States. As a result, the region has become a cornerstone of global political and economic dynamics [7]. Its geostrategic value stems from abundant natural resources, notably hydrocarbons, fuelling global industries. Competition among established and emerging powers for these resources underscores the importance of regional stability, navigational freedom, and maritime security, given that over 90% of global trade volume depends on sea transport. Critical choke points, such as the Straits of Malacca, are pivotal to global economic progress. As former Indian Navy Chief Admiral Sureesh Mehta noted, controlling these choke points and trade flows is essential to managing the strategic aspirations of rising powers.

II. IMPORTANCE OF MARITIME DOMAIN FOR INDIA AND AFRICA

A stable maritime environment in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is vital for India and African nations to safeguard their national interests and pursue sustainable development. This stability involves protecting not only coastlines but also exclusive economic zones (EEZs), trade routes, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs). With a 7,500-kilometre coastline and a two-million-square-kilometre EEZ, India holds a central position in the IOR, intersecting key maritime routes. Africa, with 38 of its 54 nations being coastal or island states, possesses a vast coastline integral to global shipping, with 90% of its trade conducted by sea. The African Maritime Domain (AMD) is thus crucial for commercial, security, environmental, and developmental objectives. Historically, African nations neglected their maritime domains due to sea blindness, limiting their understanding of marine resources.

In recent years, African states have increasingly prioritised maritime security. The continent's flourishing oil and mining industries have attracted global investors, including India, China, and the European Union, keen on exploiting African waters.

However, intensified maritime activity has led to increased sea traffic and maritime crime, which most African governments lack the capacity to manage. This has resulted in unauthorised exploitation of marine resources, prompting demands for improved maritime governance. Notable piracy incidents off East Africa, the Gulf of Aden, the Niger Delta, and the Gulf of Guinea have drawn global attention to African maritime security. The Western Indian Ocean (WIO) region's proximity to India and its resource wealth make it a key area for maritime collaboration between India and African coastal states [8].

III. INDIA'S STRATEGIC POLICY TOWARDS INDO-PACIFIC

India's maritime engagement initially focused on Mauritius and Seychelles, later extending to Madagascar. Today, India fosters strong ties with African coastal nations, with its naval vessels frequently visiting their ports on goodwill missions. During the pandemic, Indian ships provided food and medical assistance to coastal states as far as the Red Sea, reinforcing India's humanitarian commitment. At the 2023 IORA Council of Ministers meeting in Colombo, External Affairs Minister Dr. Jaishankar stressed the importance of fostering regional development while maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indian Ocean, in line with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. India's dedication to the security and prosperity of Indian Ocean states, as a first responder and net security provider, is grounded in its Neighbourhood First policy and SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision. These policies align with a broader Indo-Pacific framework promoting a rules-based order, sustainable infrastructure, navigational freedom, and respect for sovereignty.

The Indian Ocean serves as a vital conduit for trade and geopolitical interactions, requiring cooperation among IORA's 23 member states, including most African coastal nations. India views IORA as a platform for sustainable development, economic advancement, and regional stability. India's engagement with key African nations has intensified, as seen in high-level engagements at the 2023 BRICS Summit, ministerial visits to Rwanda and Uganda, and state visits with Tanzania, Kenya, and Mozambique. India has strengthened defence ties with Mozambique through training and equipment support, alongside energy sector investments to address the Cabo Delgado insurgency. Similar partnerships are growing with Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. India's opening of 18 new embassies in Africa, including in Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia, and new defence attaché roles in Ethiopia, Djibouti, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Rwanda, reflects its expanding regional presence.

India's emphasis on foreign direct investment and human resource development is evident in initiatives like the International IIT in Zanzibar, a forensic science university in Uganda, and an Entrepreneurship Development Centre in Rwanda, addressing the educational needs of Africa's youth.

India's humanitarian efforts during the pandemic, including food, vaccine, and pharmaceutical deliveries, have bolstered its regional goodwill. Providing rupee-based credit lines for defence equipment could further strengthen partnerships, positioning India as a preferred partner over China, which often extends costly loans [9].

Securing SLOCs is critical for India to maintain regional stability and ensure uninterrupted trade and resource flows. The Indian Navy maintains a presence at five strategic choke points in the Indian Ocean, from the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca Straits, through Mission-Based Deployments (MBDs). These deployments enhance India's regional influence, maritime awareness, and responsiveness to threats. India also supports EEZ protection for littoral states and has logistics-sharing agreements with nations like the United States, Australia, France, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam to mitigate logistical challenges during extended operations [10].

IV. THE ROLE OF INDIA AND AFRICAN NATIONS IN THE MARITIME SECURITY ARCHITECTURE OF THE INDO-PACIFIC

India's maritime collaboration with WIO littoral states is driven by the region's strategic location and rich resources, which East African nations increasingly leverage for sustainable development [8]. India positions itself as a security provider in the IOR through its leadership in the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). Its SAGAR policy embodies this commitment to regional security and growth [11].

India's maritime cooperation with Africa focuses on addressing security challenges, such as piracy, through military aid, capacity building, and training. The 2015 Maritime Security Strategy outlines a comprehensive approach, including regular naval visits, capacity-building training, equipment transfers, intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and monitoring stations [8]. The Indian Navy supports African efforts in anti-piracy operations, surveillance, humanitarian relief, and hydrographic surveys in countries like Kenya, Seychelles, Mauritius, Mozambique, and Tanzania. India has hydrographic cooperation MoUs with Mauritius, Tanzania, and Seychelles, addressing the region's limited hydrographic capabilities [8].

To enhance SAGAR, two initiatives are proposed: expanding the DOSTI coast guard exercises to include more IOR littoral states and institutionalising India's hydrographic expertise to benefit all IOR nations. These efforts require sustained positive bilateral relations, despite challenges with countries like the Maldives and Seychelles [12]. India's anti-piracy efforts include its role as a founding member of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) and observer status in the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), which tackles piracy, illegal fishing, and other maritime threats [13][14].

India collaborates with African nations on surveillance and joint patrols, such as patrolling Mozambique's coastline since 2003 and deploying surveillance aircraft in Seychelles and Mauritius [14]. Regular port visits by Indian naval ships to countries like Djibouti, Namibia, Senegal, Sudan, Morocco, and Egypt, along with joint exercises like the India-Mozambique-Tanzania trilateral and India-Nigeria exercises, enhance interoperability and capacity [15][16]. India's participation in multinational exercises like Cutlass Express further strengthens regional maritime cooperation [17].

V. CHALLENGES TO INDIA-AFRICA MARITIME COOPERATION IN INDO-PACIFIC

India's growing maritime engagement with African nations reflects shared objectives in security, economic development, and sustainable maritime governance. However, strategic, political, infrastructural, and external challenges hinder deeper collaboration. The African Union's focus on internal threats, coupled with limited maritime capacity, restricts effective governance. The piracy surge in the Gulf of Aden highlighted these deficiencies, and while piracy has subsided, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the primary security framework for East and Southern Africa [9].

Constrained defence budgets in African littoral states limit their maritime capabilities, leading to reliance on foreign militaries. For example, Mozambique sought external support for the Cabo Delgado insurgency, while Somalia's maritime police have prioritised internal politics over coastal security. Weak governance in West Africa further complicates maritime security efforts. South Africa's alignment with China and Russia limits its maritime cooperation with India [9].

Global powers, including the United States, China, France, and Japan, have established significant presences in Africa, particularly in Djibouti, posing challenges to India's maritime diplomacy.

China's military base and Belt and Road Initiative projects enhance its influence, while India's efforts are limited by resource constraints and infrastructural gaps. African states' multi-alignment strategies and the lack of a unified India-Africa maritime framework complicate long-term partnerships. China's String of Pearls strategy, involving naval bases and debt-driven investments, raises concerns for India and other powers about regional stability [18].

VI. CONCLUSION

India-Africa maritime cooperation in the Indo-Pacific represents a dynamic and evolving partnership rooted in shared strategic and economic interests. Through initiatives like SAGAR, IORA, and anti-piracy efforts, India has emerged as a key security provider in the Indian Ocean Region, fostering capacity building, joint exercises, and humanitarian support with African littoral states. However, challenges such as limited African maritime capacity, competition from global powers like China, and infrastructural constraints underscore the need for a more cohesive and resource-backed approach. By institutionalising hydrographic cooperation, expanding coast guard collaborations, and strengthening bilateral ties, India can enhance its maritime diplomacy and contribute to a stable, prosperous Indo-Pacific. Sustained political commitment and strategic investments will be critical to realising the full potential of this partnership, ensuring mutual growth and security in a region central to global geopolitics.

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